

# Talking About Sex in Individual and Couples Therapy

**David Slattery**

*'Romantic love is the single greatest energy system in the western psyche. In our culture it has supplanted religion as the arena in which men and women seek meaning, transcendence, wholeness and ecstasy.'*

Robert Johnson<sup>(1)</sup>

## **And one of the most potent 'sirens' of romantic love is sex!**

As a couples therapist it is hard to avoid sex, as it is often a presenting problem, and maybe it feels a bit easier (at least to the therapist!) if the problem of sex is over the other side of the room residing in the couple. However this does not mean it is easy (for couple or therapist) to talk about it, which is why on trainings to work with couples there is usually quite a bit of attention paid to sex, actually on the training itself, and through subsequent CPD and supervision. This is not always so on trainings to work with individuals where any competence in this area is mostly down to the individual trainee and their experience in therapy and supervision. This perceived lack is why I am writing this piece and why I have developed a CPD workshop<sup>(2)</sup> to offer some support in finding a way to talk about sex.

## **How to talk about sex in the consulting room?**

*'All prophets of the erotic life are false prophets because every couple has to invent sex for itself. They are not so much making love as making it up. In our erotic life uncertainty is delight, our awkwardness is passion.'*

Adam Phillips<sup>(3)</sup>

In the same way I think every relationship needs to 'make it up' including supervisors and supervisees and therapists and clients.....we have to make a relationship together that can contain the often powerful material constellated in sex.

So how do we talk about sex? The short answer is 'in the same way you talk about anything else'! So using our feelings, bodily sensations, ideas, fantasies etc. Why would

we think of it in any different way? Of course we often do, even though we might sign up more generally to the therapeutic value of 'not-knowing', of 'uncertainty' and 'awkwardness' it would not stop us attempting to take up an 'experience-near' position as a basic starting point. But often this is not the case with regard to sex.....how come?

There can often be strong taboos around sex which can lead us counsellors and psychotherapists to marginalise it in the consulting room (ironic when it is so explicit in our culture). Perhaps also trainings are influenced by such taboos and there may be a kind of trauma response in this which leads us to avoid or minimise sex as an area of exploration. In terms of our training a Humanistic and Integrative position has often been constellated *in reaction* to an authoritarian position considered to be abusive (e.g. Rogers 'locus of evaluation' placing the authority for knowing in the 'client' can be seen as a reaction to a Freudian 'expert analyst' who has the authority 'to know' through the privileged information offered by countertransference and the knowledge imparted through 'interpretation'). So we may have a tendency to identify more with the victim rather than the perpetrator in such situations. One of the archetypal perpetrators in psychoanalysis/psychotherapy is the male therapist seducing the female patient. Historically this dynamic has also been seen between charismatic humanistic workshop leaders and participants. So there may be 'constellations-type' ghost in the system here?

### **When was the last time you did it?**

If I said to you when was the last time you (as client, therapist, supervisor, supervisee, trainee, tutor, couples therapist, couple) had a conversation in a session about a '*feeling response*' they/you had. You'd probably say '*very recently*' or even '*in the last session*', and you would probably consider it good practice (context allowing) to follow such a line of inquiry in some detail. Indeed 'attunement' (to be aware of/ask after or to notice in, sometimes, minute detail what a person is feeling/thinking) would for most of us be a key technique/way of being in the consulting room. Then if I ask you when was the last time you spoke of a '*sexual response*' (a feeling, a fantasy, a body sensation) in those same roles and relationships.....I imagine your response might be '*rarely*' or even '*never*'!

I have often heard people describe the experience of not being met in their sexual feelings. That a therapist/supervisor/teacher has not been able to respond to the expression of sexual material in a facilitative, authentic congruent way (which might be, at least in part and for some, a trauma response as described earlier). This is poignant and tragic. That the hope for validation and response has been dashed and a retraumatising situation has been created. The one hoping for such a response might

never go there again. Part of the tragedy of this is that, to the extent that it is a trauma response on the part of the therapist, it can be completely unintentional.

### **So what can be done?**

*'Sexuality is alive and well and living in psychoanalysis. You just have to know where to look for it.'*

Muriel Dimen(4)

I guess the first step in any change process is realising there is something to change! The reason I created the workshop 'Talking about Sex' (\*) was as a response to what I perceived as a lack in many counselling and psychotherapy trainings. On the day I ran in June 2011 there were trainees and graduates from various different trainings: Gestalt, Body Psychotherapy, Psychodynamic Counselling and Humanistic and Integrative Counselling and Psychotherapy and there was a fairly universal feeling that neither in original trainings nor in supervision since then has sex been talked about much. Now you might say that this bit of 'research' is a bit flawed as the research participants are obviously identifying themselves as wanting further support in this area by attending a CPD workshop about talking about sex!

Well let's give everyone a chance to think a bit about this for themselves. Sex therapist Peggy Kleinplatz articulates a telling critique of **her** profession:

- *Sex therapists' fundamental assumptions are laden with sexual myths and stereotypes (e.g. About gender and 'normalcy')*
- *Current sex therapy practices are based on gender-biased, phallogentric, and heterosexist assumptions. E.g. rapid ejaculation in males is seen as a serious problem, whereas rapid ejaculation in females is seen as reason for celebration (Reiss, 1990)*
- *Sex therapy's basic conception of sexuality remains biologically based, rather than offering equal attention to personal and inter-personal processes (and I, DS, might add intersubjective processes!), cultural norms and gender bias.*
- *The field continues to focus on body parts, rather than on the persons attached to them.*
- *Sex therapists are least successful where the greatest needs are in problems related to desire(5)*

Although most of us are not primarily ‘sex therapists’ this list might provide a starting point for us to make a critique of **our** own practice. If you go through the various areas Peggy covers, what would you say about your own practice in this regard?

### **The devil’s in the detail.**

‘Phenomenological Inquiry’.....how sexy is that! Actually it kind of is. To be attended to with care, seriousness, playfulness, respect, warmth and humour in a way that acknowledges relationship and mutuality and is in the moment is about as good as it gets isn’t it? Again I would ask the question, if we are not entering into such an inquiry around sex in therapy, supervision and training.....why not? I don’t mean that there aren’t good reasons, but are the reasons being illuminated by inquiry? I have found it really helpful to attend to the detail of my fantasies (sexual or otherwise) when with a client/couple/supervisee for it is often the detail that holds the grit that makes the pearl! It is the same for dreams is it not?

### **‘Sex-affirmative’ therapy**

*‘The lesbian-affirmative therapeutic context helps the therapist and couple co-create the erotic potential space within which couples may recover or discover the passions and play in their erotic life.’*

Suzanne Lasenda<sup>(6)</sup>

An important ‘oppression-undermining’ stance is being encouraged here (born out of a political awareness of the societal disapproval, even annihilation-through-denial that Lesbian women can experience). The position Lasenda is encouraging therapists to take with a lesbian couple, holds for many gay and heterosexual couples alike. Many couples (if they find themselves in couples therapy or not) have not been able to ‘recover or discover’ this erotic play space.

I also think it is an important perspective that can be useful for the ‘therapeutic couple’ in individual therapy i.e. therapist and client (regardless of gender/orientation). If we can co-create a ‘sex-affirmative’ relationship in the consulting room then we can at a stroke (!) help free ‘organizing principles’<sup>(7)</sup>, rooted in shame that require us to steer away from our (authentic/real/sexual) selves-in-relation-to-others to keep safe, whilst also opening up to what Thomas Moore calls ‘a whole interior cosmos’. As he says:

*'Many of the men and women who consulted me over the years came with sexual concerns, which eventually were revealed as containers of the central mysteries of the person's life. In some sex is the facade of the soul, and when we deal with it thoughtfully, the whole interior cosmos comes into foreground.'*<sup>(8)</sup>

I want to add to Moore's phrase by saying 'a whole *relational* cosmos'.

I used the word 'co-create' just now (evoking Intersubjective-Systems Theory and Dialogical Gestalt <sup>(9)</sup>). From this point of view the issue of sex is a relational one i.e. whether it is possible to talk about sex or not in a therapeutic relationship (any relationship actually) is down to both client and therapist. Infact you might even argue that the therapist has more responsibility in this (in the same way that we might consider taking the risk and responsibility in disclosing something about our feeling state to try and encourage a feeling dialogue in the therapy.

### **Languaging sex in the consulting room**

Moore's approach to sex as connected to soul encourages the use of a different language than an approach that sees sex as more materialistic, more functional. I encourage a use of language (in myself and whoever I am working with) that is constantly connected to, and viscerally emanating from, our vulnerability. There is a great temptation when we are anxious, nervous, frightened to become sure and confident. This 'hiding in expertise' can be devastating in the consulting room, as the denied anxiety of the therapist can be left for the client to feel. Rather I would prefer that we constantly make an attempt at a co-constructed language (a la Bob Hobson <sup>(10)</sup>) that is inclusive and tentative. A use of words that attempts to acknowledge nervousness and shame and excitement and pleasure, therefore grounding the dialogue in body-process-relationality. In this way we might co-create a place of safety that has real healing potential and can be exported from the therapy into everyday life and relationships. This seed of sexual relatedness ('home-grown' and 'hand-made' not 'imported from experts') has a real chance to blossom in lives outside the consulting room.

Now of course there are all sorts of questions around particular context (and power and gender) that need consideration with such interventions, but are these conversations even happening in supervision? I really hope so as otherwise we are closing off a potentially powerful area of exploration and therefore healing.

I would be happy to dialogue with anybody in response to this piece.

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**\*‘Talking about Sex’** CPD 1 day workshop March 16<sup>th</sup> 2012  
(details at [www.relational-psychotherapy.co.uk](http://www.relational-psychotherapy.co.uk))

## References

1. *‘WE: understanding the psychology of romantic love’* Robert Johnson (1983:xi) New York: HarperCollins
2. *‘Talking about Sex in Individual and Couples Therapy.’* A CPD workshop: next running March 2012 details: [www.relational-psychotherapy.co.uk/CPD](http://www.relational-psychotherapy.co.uk/CPD)
3. *‘Monogamy’* Adam Phillips (1996:95) London: Faber and Faber
4. *‘Between lust and libido: sex, psychoanalysis, and the moment before.’* Muriel Dimen (1999:415) *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* (9)
5. *‘Quickies: the handbook of brief sex therapy.’* Green S. and Flemons D. Eds. (2004:192) New York: WW Norton and Co.
6. *‘Passion, Play and Erotic Potential Space in Lesbian Relationships.’* Suzanne Iasenza (2004:154) in *‘Uncoupling Convention: psychoanalytic approaches to same-sex couples and families.’* Jack Drescher and Ann D’Ercole (Eds) New Jersey: The Analytic Press
7. (See 9)
8. *‘The Soul of Sex: cultivating life as an act of love.’* Thomas Moore (1998: xii) New York: HarperCollins
9. **Intersubjective-Systems Theory** is a re-visioning of psychoanalysis coming out of Self Psychology (Kohut), developed by Stolorow, Atwood, Orange, Brandchaft (and others) and ‘Organizing principles’ is a core theoretical idea, meaning the unresolved, unintegrated states or ideas that shape our experience.

**Dialogical Gestalt** is influenced by the philosophy of Martin Buber, developed by Friedman, Hycner and Jacobs. An integration of these theories is explored in the bcpc Core Course 'Relational Process' (the booklist is available on the website <http://www.bcpc.org.uk/training/courses/people/Core-Study-Courses/> although this is part of the psychotherapy training program, 'Core courses' are open to everyone).

10. *'Forms of Feeling: the heart of psychotherapy.'* Robert Hobson (1985)  
London: Tavistock Publications